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ABSTRACT

A reading conference in the Chicago area provided a setting in which to systematically explore the views of 24 professionals regarding a number of statements about Informal Reading Inventories (IRIs). The results obtained from a 24-item questionnaire indicated that professionals perceive IRIs as instruments which generate more questions than answers, although use of the instruments was frequent. It is concluded that the raising of questions about problems with IRIs is a healthy state of affairs. (RB)

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Informal Reading Inventories: A Survey Among Professionals

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Purpose

Surveys professionals' views regarding statements about informal reading inventories.

Methods

A group of 24 professionals who attended a conference in the Chicago area responded to 24 statements about IRIs. Because the size of the sample was small, the results were analyzed for general trends.

Results and Conclusions

Only one area was perceived as "no problem". That area included the usability of the IRI by specialists and in a clinical situation. Problem areas included the accurate placement of students, differences between IRIs and standardized test results, and a number of specific components of IRIs: the topics of reading selections, comprehension questions, counting miscues, and differences in oral and silent reading. Uncertainty existed with regard to isolated word lists and the validity and reliability of IRIs. It was concluded that professionals can use the results of the study to provide instruction and inservice training for obtaining greater insights into IRIs.

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CS 002 491

Informal Reading Inventories: A Survey Among Professionals

Informal reading inventories (IRIs) have had a long history in reading instruction (Beldin, 1970). Classroom teachers and a variety of specialists have used the graded paragraphs to aid in determining the child's independent, instructional, and frustration levels. The way in which IRIs are administered, scored, and interpreted varies among professionals. But what problems confront users of IRIs? Do certain areas of the IRI pose more significant problems than other areas? These were the two basic questions this study tried to answer.

Sample and Procedure

A reading conference in the Chicago area provided a setting to systematically explore the views of 24 professionals regarding a number of statements about IRIs. The 24 professionals were made up of 12 reading specialists, 8 classroom teachers, 1 administrator, and 3 directors of resource rooms or media centers. Because a few of the teachers had combination rooms, each grade, one through nine, was represented. In terms of teaching experience, the participants had from one to over twenty years of experience. More than two-thirds of the group had over 8 years of experience. In terms of educational background, 16 of the professionals had master's degrees and the remaining 8 professionals had bachelor's degrees.

To secure their views on IRIs, a questionnaire containing 24 items was distributed to the participants. They were then asked to read each item and mark the column that most accurately reflected their current thinking on IRIs.

The Table presents the responses to each of the 24 statements. Although it was possible to analyze the data by age, experience, educational attainment, or any combination of these variables, the small sample size prompted the investigator to focus on general trends. Subsequent studies could be undertaken to explore the impact of specific variables.

Results and Discussion

From the responses to the questionnaire, there was only one area which the respondents perceived as "no problem". That area included the usability of the IRI by reading or learning disability specialists and its use in a clinical situation (items 23 and 24). The group was about evenly split on the usability of the IRI in a classroom situation (item 22). A number of respondents indicated that the use of IRIs by classroom teachers was a problem because of the time involved. Apparently most respondents felt that IRIs could be administered by a wide variety of professionals (item 2); however, the time for administering, scoring, and interpreting IRIs may restrict their use among classroom teachers.

Users of IRIs are confronted with a host of problems (see items, 1, 4 7, 8, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, and 19). One of the most significant problems was indicated by items 18 and 19 which concerned the accurate placement of students in instructional materials. Nearly all of the respondents felt that IRIs overrated a student's instructional level (item 18). Another related item (19) revealed that IRIs may also underestimate a student's instructional level. Although this latter problem does not occur as frequently as overplacement, it seems that many professionals have noted discrepancies between IRI results and the subsequent placement of students in instructional materials.

The respondents noted differences in results between standardized reading tests and IRIs (item 1). This finding is not particularly surprising since a number of research studies (Johns, 1975; McCracken, 1967; [illegible]) indicate that accurate placement of students in reading materials using standardized reading tests is fraught with difficulties. Chall (1958) has perceptively noted the cautions that need to be kept in mind when interpreting standardized reading tests:

> Some teachers assume that the standardized test scores indicate a pupil's frustration level or top level of performance and have, therefore, selected readers on a grade lower than the standardized test scores. This may not always be wise since, for many children, especially those who lack confidence or have an unusually slow rate of reading, the standardized scores may give a minimal estimate of performance. Such children can actually benefit more from a higher level of materials. (p. 135).

It should also be noted that standardized tests were not designed to place students in instructional materials. The results of this survey reinforce the need to continually reappraise a student's instructional level and to remain sensitive to evidence beyond the results of formal and informal devices. Responses to item 14 indicate that there is a need for continuous diagnosis. Although most educators probably know that continuous diagnosis is an important element in the reading program, the responses to this item emphasize that the realities of teaching make continuous diagnosis difficult to integrate into the ongoing instructional program.

The results to the questionnaire also led to a number of concerns that focused on specific components of the IRI. The topic (item 4) and interest level (item 15) of the selections, the number (item 8) and type (item 7) of comprehension questions, the selections used at the early reading levels (item 12), the differences in oral and silent reading (item 13), and the counting of miscues (item 10) all appear to represent problem areas. It is little wonder that these areas are problems for practicing professionals -- all one needs to do is survey the available literature and peruse currently available IRIs. The topics of the reading selections, the number and types of comprehension questions, the scoring of miscues, and the determination of reading levels vary widely among IRIs. Recent research reports (Burke and Goodman, 1970; Ekwall, 1973, 1974; Guszak, 1970; Estes and Vaughan, 1973; and Pikulski, 1974) have also raised questions in these same areas.

Finally, analysis of the results from the questionnaire indicated several areas of uncertainty. The use of isolated word lists (item 3), using questions to evaluate comprehension (item 9), and the validity (item 20) and reliability (item 21) of IRIs were areas of uncertainty for 25 to 33 percent of the respondents. Page (1971) has enumerated some of the dangers in using isolated word lists. Pikulski (1974) has indicated the need to establish the validity and reliability of IRIs in clinical situations. Goodman and Burke (1972) have suggested an alternate strategy to replace traditional comprehension questions. Although the above areas pose uncertainties for some respondents, another 33 to 50 per cent view these same areas as minor to significant problems.

Conclusions

What, then, has this study shown? When one considers the results of the questionnaire in total, the following conclusion seems warranted: professionals

perceive the use of IRIs as instruments which generate more questions than answers. The respondents frequently use IRIs, but when given an opportunity to react to statements about IRIs, they identify many areas of concern. One might be prompted, therefore, to dismiss IRIs as a valuable adjunct to diagnostic teaching. But there is another conclusion that appears justified -- professionals, at least those who responded to this questionnaire, are raising questions and sensing problems with IRIs. And that, in and of itself, can be viewed as a healthy state of affairs.

There was probably a time when little or no doubt existed regarding what constituted an error in reading. Even the criteria for determining reading levels was probably taken for granted. Both these areas are currently subject to differing viewpoints. It is doubtful that these and other problems will be adequately resolved for all those professionals who use IRIs. Perhaps, though, these and other areas will serve to help professionals seek answers to these questions. Ultimately, professionals may understand the broader implications of some of the questions and their subsequent impact on reading instruction.

This study, albeit limited in scope and sample size, offers evidence from professionals in the field that clear problem areas exist with IRIs. The responses to the questionnaire provide avenues for college professors, reading consultants, and other specialists to provide an environment where teachers can gain greater insights into IRIs.

Table

Results of IRI Questionnaire Administered to 24 Professionals

No Problem	Very Minor Problem	Uncertain	Minor Problem	Significant Problem	Items on Questionnaire
5*	3	1	6	9	1. The differences in results when an IRI and a standardized reading test are given
12	4	0	4	4	2. The procedure for administration
4	5	9	3	3	3. The use of isolated word lists
4	3	2	6	9	4. The topic of the reading selection
4	4	2	10	4	5. The length of the reading selection
6	6	3	2	7	6. The use of pictures or illustrations to accompany the reading selections
4	1	3	5	11	7. The types of questions used to evaluate comprehension
4	1	3	8	8	8. The number of questions used to evaluate comprehension
4	4	7	5	4	9. The whole notion of using questions to evaluate comprehension
4	3	2	3	12	10. The counting of errors (miscues)
3	7	4	4	6	11. The criteria for the three reading levels
2	7	2	3	10	12. The reading selections used at the very early levels
2	4	3	8	7	13. The readability ratings vs. the "actual" difficulty levels
2	1	3	2	16	14. The testing-placement syndrome vs. continuous diagnosis
2	1	0	6	15	15. The role of interest

No Problem	Very Minor Problem	Uncertain	Minor Problem	Significant Problem	Items on Questionnaire
0	2	0	8	14	16. Differences in oral reading vs. silent reading
2	4	4	7	7	17. Using IRIs for placement in content areas
1	2	0	3	18	18. The results indicate that Sue has instructional level of X but she can't read X materials in the instructional program
4	3	1	5	11	19. The results indicate that Herman has an instructional level of Y but I know he can read classroom materials above that Y level
3	4	6	5	6	20. The validity of the IRI
4	1	8	5	6	21. The reliability of the IRI
9	3	0	4	8	22, The usability of the IRI in a classroom situation
16	3	3	0	2	23. The usability of the IRI in a clinical situation
16	2	1	2	3	24. The usability of the IRI by a reading specialist or LD teacher

*Indicates number of responses in a particular category.

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